

Black River Elk Range Herd Update

January 2017-June 2017

Introduction:

After two successful years of releases during the Black River Elk Range reintroduction effort, the founding herd has now been established and is beginning to settle into the Black River country. In total, 73 elk were released in Jackson County over the two year project (23 in 2015 and 50 in 2016), including 42 cows and 16 bulls from the Kentucky capture efforts, and 15 calves born in the Wisconsin quarantine pen. The reintroduction efforts have now shifted to the Clam Lake Elk Range, where project goals include translocation of up to 75 elk over the remaining time frame of the project.

Herd Update:

At the time of this writing, we are currently at the tail end of the calving season, which is always an exciting time of the year. We estimate that 12-14 calves are currently on the ground with several more anticipated to be born. Based on the number of breeding age cows and whether or not those cows were with bulls during the 2016 breeding season, we anticipate up to 20 calves born this summer. In an effort to monitor the survival and movements of these newborn calves, we are radio collaring a subset of the calves born. We have had tremendous volunteer support to search for calves this spring and would not have experienced our level of success without their efforts. To date, seven calves have been radio collared and remain alive, and two additional calves were located but not collared. The first calf collared was found on May 25, with the last found on July 10. Based on their estimated age at capture, these calves were likely born May 22 and July 3, respectively. It is likely that two additional calves were born during the first week of July, however, were not verified. Using average gestation periods for elk, these cows would have been bred September 14-October 26, 2016. Thus, breeding occurred over a prolonged period and was later than anticipated based on prior expectations. The average birth weights have been high (42 lbs at time of capture) and calves have been in excellent physical condition, indicating the exceptional health of the cows and quality of habitat in Jackson County.

With the addition of these calves, the herd is estimated to number a minimum of 61 to 63 elk with any additional calves not yet verified adding to this total. We may see the herd reach 65+ by the end of July if additional calves are born and we continue to see high calf survival rates. The current herd consists of 33 cows, 16 bulls, 4 bull calves, 3 cow calves, and 5+ unknown sex calves.

From January 1, 2017 through June 30, 2017, there have been seven documented elk mortalities. Complications associated with meningeal worm have been the leading cause of mortality during this period, accounting for four of the seven mortalities. Additional elk were lost to vehicle collision (1), capture related injuries (1), and wolf predation (1).

2016-17 Winter Trapping:

In an effort to replace dropped or malfunctioning radio collars and collar previously uncollared elk to effectively monitor movements, habitat use, and survival of this new herd, elk project staff trapped elk on several different properties from December 2016-March 2017. Using remote trail cameras and a remotely operated trap trigger, staff were able to capture target animals as opportunities arose. Eleven elk were targeted for capture (2 uncollared calves, 2 yearlings with calf collars, 6 uncollared bulls, and 1 cow with a malfunctioning collar). Seven of the 11 target animals were captured and collared. Three adult bulls and one cow with malfunctioning collar were not captured.

Staff also made efforts to relocate several elk from outside of the range during this time period. A cow/calf pair was trapped and relocated in late December and a lone cow was darted and relocated in March.

Elk locations:

During the second year of the project, the elk continue to move throughout the Black River Elk Range and adjoining areas, exploring new areas on a regular basis. Currently, the herd is split into one main cow/calf group (~30 animals), four smaller cow/calf groups (4-8 animals each), several bachelor groups of bulls, and individual cows and bulls on their own. While all of the cow/calf groups remain in eastern Jackson County, individual elk are also currently found in Dunn, Clark, Monroe, and Trempealeau counties. It is anticipated that many of these outlying animals will return to Jackson County prior to the start of the breeding season as we saw during the 2016 rut. Long distance movements >15mi/day have been documented; however, typical daily movements have been <1mi/day for the majority of the elk. A UW-Stevens Point research project on the initial habitat selection of these elk is anticipated to be completed in December 2017.

Habitat Management:

Utilizing GPS location information and known habitat preferences of elk, habitat management activities continue across both the Black River State Forest and Jackson County Forest. These projects aim to improve the amount and quality of available habitat for the elk. Forest wildlife openings are a key focus and are essential in a forest dominated landscape. Approximately 30 acres of a grass/forb mix was planted in 2016 with another 30+ acres scheduled to be planted in the fall of 2017. Work has occurred throughout the summer to prepare these fields for planting, and each one has proven to be extremely beneficial for elk within the Black River Elk range. In addition to forest openings management, prescribed burns have also been conducted. In May 2017, project staff completed 300 acres of prescribed burns and prepared another 30 acres for burning in the fall of 2017. Elk project partners (Jackson County Forest, Black River State Forest) are also hard at work actively controlling the spread of invasive species.

Interstate Right-of-Way Project:

During the fall and winter of both 2015/16 and 2016/17, several small groups of elk were utilizing an area immediately adjacent to the east side of I94 for prolonged periods of time. This elk activity resulted in a potentially hazardous situation for both elk and motorists. To date, three elk have been confirmed to have been hit and killed by vehicles, including two hit on the westbound lane of I-94 in Jackson County.

The current Wisconsin DOT right-of-way fence was constructed in 1968 has many areas of the fence being down due to fallen trees, vehicle accidents, or frost shifting of fence posts. Discussions are currently occurring with WI DOT, Jackson County Highway Department, and the American Transmission Company to explore the possibility of installing a new, 6-8' interstate right of way fence in coordination with the construction of ATC's Badger-Coulee transmission line. Staff has also worked closely with WDOT and the Jackson County Highway Department to repair the existing fence.